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Victorian Victuals



by Loren N. Horton

A BEWILDERING abundance of food marks many historical accounts of Christmas and New Year's celebrations. For instance, a New Year's menu at a Des Moines hotel in 1885 listed no less than fifty-nine items.

More modest celebrations also were marked by abundance. Looking back to when he was a boy of nine, Iowa author Phil Stong recalled a Christmas dinner in 1908 in Keosauqua, Iowa. "For a person of about my years and swallowing ability," he explained in a 1957 *Palimpsest* article, Christmas dinner included an entire leg of a large turkey, with some white meat; a half-pint of sage and onion dressing; a pint of mashed potatoes and giblet gravy; a half-pint mashed turnips; one-third of a loaf of bread, spread with butter and varied jams; a pint of cranberries and pickles; a pint of vegetables such as onions, beets, peas, and lima beans; a quarter of a mince pie, "oranges, celery, olives, and candy to fill," and a pint each of milk and cider. (Stong added that the cider and milk didn't count because they would "soak" in.)

"This is far beyond the capacity of the human (a vague term) stomach, of course," Stong commented "but it is well within the capacity of the entire boy."

He continued, "About halfway through the meal Great-Aunt Beatie would tell us again of a little boy of her acquaintance who ate so much he busted his stummick and died in prolonged and horrible agonies. We never did learn whether he busted inside only or whether he spilled. But we felt nothing but contempt for the feeble wretch."

In the tradition, then, of Victorian dining excess, the *Palimpsest* offers here a few Victorian holiday recipes, just as they appeared in turn-of-the-century cookbooks.

Victorian etiquette and cookbooks abound with recipes for plum pudding, a ceremonial dish brought blazing to the table. The following pudding and sauce recipes are from Woman's Favorite Cook Book, by Annie R. Gregory, published in 1907.

CHRISTMAS PLUM PUDDING

Chop one cupful of beef suet, two cupfuls of bread and one-half cupful of citron. Mix the citron, one cupful of seeded raisins and one cupful of currants, well washed, with part of a pint of flour. Put four well-beaten eggs, one heaping cupful of sugar, one teaspoonful of salt in one cupful of milk, one teaspoonful of cloves, two of cinnamon, one-half of a nutmeg in a bowl. Stir in the fruit, bread-crumbs and suet, putting in last a level teaspoonful of soda dissolved in warm water and adding the rest of the flour. Mix thoroughly and boil for four hours. Turn bottom-side up on platter, pour over it some good brandy and touch a match to it. Bring on the table while blazing. Serve with brandy sauce.

RICH BRANDY SAUCE

Stir a small teaspoonful of corn-starch in a little cold water to a smooth paste; add to it a cupful of boiling water, one cupful of sugar, a small piece of butter; boil all together five minutes. Remove from the fire and when cool, stir into it one-half cupful of brandy.

In 1891, the Ladies of Plymouth Church in Des Moines, Iowa, edited "76": A Cook Book. Mrs. Henry Scribner contributed this recipe:

NEW YEAR'S COOKIES

Beat three-fourths of a pound of butter and one pound of sugar to a cream and add three eggs, one teacup of sour milk, one teaspoon of soda, a half cup of caraway seeds and flour enough to roll nicely.